



Wellesley Civil Discourse Initiative

Working to strengthen our community through dialogue

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Civil Discourse Initiative Launched in Wellesley to Help Residents Talk About Tough Topics

Wellesley, MA -- After witnessing a decline in civility in recent times, members of the Wellesley community are launching a local initiative to give residents a new way to come together to talk about important issues facing the town. The Wellesley Civil Discourse Initiative aims to address the increasingly divisive and fractious tone in public conversations by organizing carefully planned dialogues with trained facilitators.

Organizers of the initiative are working closely with town leaders, local non-profits, and community volunteers to help shape the initiative.

Describing the goals of the project, planning team member Lise Olney said, "We want to train people in our community to facilitate conversations so when we face difficult issues, we are ready to have discussions that will help us understand each other's perspectives -- even when we disagree." The practice of facilitating dialogue is intended to increase understanding, rather than to reach agreement. Key components of dialogue include speaking in ways that are respectful, listening to understand and not to rebut, and asking questions that are genuine and not rhetorical.

The initiative will start with a two-day training on March 11 and 12 in which ten members of town staff and ten community members will learn to facilitate Reflective Structured Dialogue with Kathy Eckles from [Essential Partners](https://whatisessential.org) (whatisessential.org). Kathy Eckles helped establish the community dialogue program Gloucester Conversations and has since supported multiple communities in developing their own programs.

Following the training, initiative organizers are planning two virtual public events via Zoom:

“Community Conversations: How Citizens Are Rebuilding the Public Square,” Tuesday, March 23, 7:00 to 8:15 pm, will introduce the Wellesley community to the concept of a civil discourse initiative and how it has worked in other towns. Leaders from Gloucester, Groton, and Watertown will tell their stories of how they are bringing together people with diverse perspectives for open and inclusive public conversations using facilitated dialogue. Register here for Zoom webinar: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_vXJEalTtQGyfEVNQqhFhtA.

“A Dialogue on Coping with COVID-19 in Wellesley,” on Tuesday, April 6, 7:00 to 9:00 pm, will be a facilitated dialogue on how Wellesley residents are coping with COVID-19. The event will start with a brief introduction and then attendees will move into breakout rooms to participate in a facilitated dialogue led by a trained facilitator. (Registration for this event will open after March 23.)

All events are free to participants and are made possible through generous grants from Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association (MIIA) and the Community Fund for Wellesley, a fund of the Foundation for MetroWest, as well as staff support from the Town of Wellesley.

Wellesley Civil Discourse Planning Team: Taylor Barnhill, Amy Frigulietti, David Gibbs, Will Griffin, Sheri Kassirer, and Lise Olney.